

1939-1945: The Edelweiss Pirates



An account of the Edelweiss Pirates, a World War II era German anti-Nazi movement of working class youth who fought against the regime.

*Hitler's power may lay us low,
And keep us locked in chains,
But we will smash the chains one day,
We'll be free again
We've got fists and we can fight,
We've got knives and we'll get them out
We want freedom, don't we boys?
We're the fighting Navajos!*

Why were the Nazis able to control Germany so easily? Why was there so little active opposition to them? Why were the old parties of the SPD and KPD unable to offer any real resistance? How could a totalitarian regime so easily contain what had been the strongest working class in Europe?

We are taught, that the Nazis duped the German population and that it took the armed might of the Allies to liberate Europe from their enslavement. This article aims to show how the Nazis were able to contain the working class and to tell some of the tales of resistance that really took place.

Dealing with the opposition

Acting with a ruthlessness that surprised their opponents, the Nazis banned their opponents, the Social Democrats and the Communists. For the working class this was far more serious than just the destruction of two state capitalist parties. It was accompanied by the annihilation of a whole area of social life around working class communities. Many of the most confident working class militants were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

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part of official state activity. In some circumstances this meant simple actions like beatings.

In others, SA groups moved into and took over working class pubs and centres. The effect was to isolate, intimidate and render powerless the working class.

Many workers believed that the Nazis would not remain in power forever. They believed that the next election would see them swept from power and 'their' parties returned. Workers only needed to bind their time. When it became clear that this was not going to happen, the myth changed. The role for oppositionists became to keep the party structures intact until such time as the Nazis were defeated. There is no doubt that even the simple act of distributing Socialist (SPD) or Communist (KPD) propaganda took an incredible degree of heroism, for the consequences of being caught were quite clear to all – beatings, torture and death. It meant that families would be left without breadwinners, subjected to police surveillance and intimidation. The result was often passivity and inaction.

As early as 1935, workers were aware of the consequences that 'subversive'

activity would have on their families. A blacksmith in 1943 expressed the problem simply: “My wife is still alive, that’s all. It’s only for her sake that I don’t shout it right in their faces...You know these blackguards can only do all this because each of us has a wife or mother at home that he’s got to think of... people have too many things to consider. After all, you’re not alone in this world. And these SS devils exploit the fact.”

Throughout the period of Nazi rule there was industrial unrest, there were strikes and acts of disobedience and even sabotage. All these, however, attracted the attention of the Gestapo.

The Gestapo had the assistance of employers and stooges in the workforce. The least a striker could expect was arrest. As a consequence, those who were politically opposed to the Nazi state kept themselves away from industrial struggle. To be arrested would have led not only to personal sacrifice, but also could have compromised the political organisations to which he or she belonged. To reinforce the message to workers, the Gestapo set up special industrial concentration camps attached to major factories.

To put the intensity of Nazi repression into context, during the period 1933-45, at least 30,000 German people were executed for opposing the state. This does not include countless others who died as a result of beatings, of their treatment in camps, or as a result of the official policy of euthanasia for those deemed mentally ill. Thousands of children were declared morally or biologically defective because they fell below the Aryan

‘norm’ and were murdered by doctors. This fate also befell youngsters with mental and physical disabilities as well as many who listened to the wrong kind of music.

However, Nazi domination of the working class did not rely solely on repression. Nazi industrial policy aimed to fragment the class, to replace working class solidarity with Nazi comradeship and solidarity with the state.

To start with, pay rises were forbidden. To strengthen competition, hourly rates were done away with. Piece rates became the norm. If workers wanted to earn more then they would have to produce more. Workers’ interests were to be represented by the German Workers’

Front (DAF), which they were forced to belong to and which of course

represented solely the interests of the state and employers.

Unable to obtain pay rises with their employers it became common in a situation of full employment for workers to move from one factory to another in search of higher wages. On the one hand, this defeated the Nazi objectives of limiting pay; on the other hand it further weakened the bonds of solidarity between workers.

Knowing that they could not rule solely through fear, the Nazis gave 'welfare' concessions to the working class. Family allowances were paid for the first time; organised holidays and

outings were provided at low cost. For many workers this was their first opportunity to go away on holiday. Social activities were provided through Nazi organisations.

There is little evidence that the Nazis won over the working class ideologically, nonetheless, this combination of repression and amelioration served to confuse many who would otherwise have been outright opponents.

The spectacles we have all seen of Nazi rallies, book burnings, parades and speeches are not evidence that workers were convinced of Nazi rule. It was clear to all what the consequence of not attending, of not carrying a placard or waving a flag would be. However, they must have increased the sense of isolation and powerlessness of those who would have liked to resist. As a result there was little open resistance from working class adults to the Nazis throughout their period in power.

Young People

If the Nazi policy towards adults was based on coercion, their policy towards young people was subtler. Put simply, the intention was to indoctrinate every young person, to make them a good national socialist citizen proudly upholding the ideals of the party. The means chosen to do this was the Hitler Youth (HJ).

By the end of 1933, all youth organisations outside the Hitler Youth had been banned – with the exception of those controlled by the Catholic Church that was busy cosying up to the Nazis at the time. Boys were to be organised into the Deutsches Jungvolk between the ages of 10 and 14 and the Hitler Youth proper from 14 to 18. They quickly incorporated around 40%

of boys. Girls were to be enrolled into the Bund Deutsche Madel (BDM), but the Nazis were much less interested in getting them to join. The objective was to get all boys into the HJ.

When this failed to take place, laws were passed gradually making it compulsory by 1939.

In the early days, being in the HJ was far from a chore. Boys got to take part in sports, go camping, hike, play competitive games – as well as being involved in drill and political indoctrination. Being in the HJ gave youngsters the chance to play one form of authority off against another. They could avoid schoolwork by claiming to be involved in HJ work. The HJ

provided excuses when dealing with other authority figures – like parents and priests. On the other hand, they could also blame pressures from school in order to get out of more unpleasant Hitler Youth tasks! In some parts of the country the HJ provided the first opportunity to start a sports club, to get away from parents, to experience some independence.

As the 1930s went on, the function of the HJ and BDM changed. The objectives of the regime became more obviously military and aimed at conquest. The HJ was seen as a way recruiting and training young men into the armed forces. As war became more likely, the emphasis shifted away from leisure activities and into military training, State policy became one of forcing all to be in the HJ. T made seemingly harmless activities, like getting together with your mates for an evening, criminal offences if they took place outside the HJ

of BDM.

The HJ set up its own police squads to supervise young people. These Streifendienst patrols were made up of Hitler Youth members scarcely older than those they were meant to be policing.

By 1938, reports from Social Democrats in Germany to their leaders in exile were able to report that: “In the long run young people too are feeling increasingly irritated by the lack of freedom and the mindless drilling that is customary in the National Socialist organisations. It is therefore no wonder that symptoms of fatigue are becoming particularly apparent among their ranks...”

The outbreak of war brought the true nature of the HJ even more sharply into

focus. Older HJ

members were called up. More and more time was taken up with drill and political indoctrination. Bombing led to the destruction of many of the sporting facilities. The HJ

became more and more obviously a means of oppression.

As the demands for fresh recruits to the armed forces became more intense, the divisions within the HJ became more acute. The German education system at the time was sharply divided along class lines. Most working class children left school at the age of 14. A few went on to secondary or grammar schools along with the children of middle class and professional families. As older HJ members were called up, the middle class school students took the place of the leaders. The rank and file was increasingly made up of young workers hardly likely to take too well to being ordered about at HJ meetings! It is not difficult to imagine the scene of a snotty doctor's kid still in school trying to give orders to a bunch of young factory workers and having to use the threat of official punishment to get his own way.

Dissatisfaction grew. Initially, the acute labour shortages of the early war years meant that the Nazis could not resort to the kind of Nazi terror tactics that they employed against other dissidents. As the war went on, many of these young people's fathers died or were sent to the front. Many were bombed out of their own homes. The only future they could see for themselves was to wear a uniform and fight for a lost cause.

One teenager said in 1942: "Everything the HJ preaches is a fraud. I know this for certain, because everything I had to say in the HJ myself was a fraud."

By the end of the 1930s, thousands of young people were finding ways to avoid the clutches of the Hitler Youth. They were gathering together in their own gangs and starting to enjoy themselves again. This terrified the Nazis, particularly when the teenagers started to defend their own social spaces physically. What particularly frightened the Nazis was that these young people were the products of their own education system. They had no contact with the old SPD or KPD, knew nothing of Marxism or the old labour movement. They had been educated by the Nazis in Nazi schools, their free time had been regimented by the HJ

listening to Nazi propaganda and taking part in officially approved activities and

sports.

These gangs went under different names. Their favoured clothes varied from town to town, as did their badges. In Essen they were called the Farhtenstenze (Travelling Dudes), in Oberhausen and Dusseldorf the Kittelbach Pirates, in Cologne they were the Navajos. But all saw themselves as Edelweiss Pirates (named after an edelweiss flower badge many wore).

Gestapo files in Cologne contain the names of over 3,000 teenagers identified as Edelweiss Pirates. Clearly, there must have been many more and their numbers must have been even greater when taken over Germany as a whole.

Initially, their activities were in themselves pretty harmless. They hung around in parks and on street corners, creating their own social space in the way teenagers do everywhere (usually to the annoyance of adults). At weekends they would take themselves off into the countryside on hikes and camping trips in a perverse way mirroring the activities initially provided by the HJ themselves. Unlike the HJ trips, however, these expeditions comprised boys and girls together, so adding a different, more exciting and more normal dimension than provided by the HJ. Whereas the HJ had taken young people away for trips to isolate and indoctrinate them, the Edelweiss Pirates expeditions got them away from the Party and gave them the time and space to be themselves.

On their trips they would meet up with Pirates from other towns and cities. Some went as far as to travel the length and breadth of Germany doing wartime, when to travel without papers was an illegal action.

Daring to enjoy themselves on their own was a criminal act. They were supposed to be under Party control. Inevitably they came across HJ Streifendienst patrols. Instead of running, the Pirates often stood and fought. Reports sent to Gestapo officers suggest that as often as not the Edelweiss Pirates won these fights. "I therefore request that the police ensure that this riff-raff is dealt with once and for all. The HJ are taking their lives into their hands when they go out on the streets."

The activities of the Edelweiss Pirates grew bolder as the war progressed. They engaged in pranks against the allies, fights against their enemies and moved on to small acts of sabotage.

They were accused of being slackers at work and social parasites. They began to

help Jews, army deserters and prisoners of war. They painted anti-Nazi slogans on walls and some started to collect Allied propaganda leaflets and shove them through people's letterboxes.

“There is a suspicion that it is these youths who have been inscribing the walls of the pedestrian subway on the Altebbbergstrasse with the slogans ‘Down with Hitler’, ‘The OKW

(Military High Command) is lying’, ‘Medals for Murder’, ‘Down with Nazi Brutality’ etc.

However often these inscriptions are removed within a few days new ones appear on the walls again.” (1943 Dusseldorf-Grafenberg Nazi Party report to the Gestapo).

As time went on, a few grew bolder and even more heroic. They raided army camps to obtain arms and explosives, made attacks on Nazi figures other than the HJ and took part in partisan activities. The Head of the Cologne Gestapo was one victim of the Edelweiss Pirates.

The authorities reacted with their full armoury of repressive measures. These ranged from individual warnings, round-ups and temporary detention (followed by a head shaving), to weekend imprisonment, reform school, labour camp, youth concentration camp or criminal trial. Thousands were caught up in this hunt. For many, the end was death. The so-called leaders of the Cologne Edelweiss Pirates were publicly hanged in November 1944.

However, as long as the Nazis needed workers in armament factories and soldiers for their war, they could not resort to the physical extermination of thousands of young Germans.

Moreover, it is fair to say that the state was confused as to what to do with these rebels. They came from German stock, the sort of people who should have been grateful for what the Nazis gave. Unwilling to execute thousands and unable to comprehend what was happening, the state was equally unable to contain them.

Wall of Silence

So why has so little been heard of the Edelweiss Pirates? When I started researching this article, I found it extremely hard to find information about them.

Most seemed to revolve around the research of the German historian Detlev Peukert, whose writings remain essential reading. Searches of the internet revealed only two articles.

A number of explanations come to mind. The post-war Allied authorities wanted to reconstruct Germany into a modern, western, democratic state. To do this, they enforced strict labour laws including compulsory work. The Edelweiss Pirates had a strong anti-work ethos, so they came into conflict with the new authorities too. A report in 1949 spoke of the

“widespread phenomenon of unwillingness to work that was becoming a habit of many young people.” The prosecution of so-called ‘young idlers’ was sometimes no less rigid under Allied occupation than it was under the Nazis. A court in 1947 sent one young woman to prison for five months for ‘refusal to work’. The young became enemies of the new order too.

The political opponents of the Nazis had been either forced into exile, murdered or hid their politics. Clandestine activity had centred on keeping party structures intact. They could not afford to acknowledge that physical resistance had been alive and well and based on young

people’s street gangs! To the politicians of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and SPD, the Edelweiss Pirates were just as much riff-raff as they were to the Nazis. The myth of the just war used by the allies relied heavily on the idea that all Germans had been at least silent during the Nazi period if not actively supporting the regime. To maintain this fiction the actions of ‘street hooligans’ in fighting the Nazis had to be forgotten.

Decades on, interest in the Edelweiss Pirates is beginning to resurface. More is being published on them and a film is being planned. We need to make sure that they are never forgotten again. As the producers of the film say: “the Edelweiss Pirates were no absolute heroes, but rather ordinary people doing extraordinary things.” It is precisely this that gives us hope for the future.

We march by banks of Ruhr and Rhine

And smash the Hitler Youth in twain.

Our song is freedom, love and life,

We're the Pirates of the Edelweiss.

By the Anarchist Federation

More information

Interview with Walter Mayer, an Edelweiss Pirate